

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
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FOR THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON BENEFITS
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITH RESPECT TO
H.R. 1291--THE 21ST CENTURY
MONTGOMERY GI BILL ENHANCEMENT ACT
JUNE 4, 2001

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Benefits, we are pleased to have this opportunity to provide comments on the provisions of H.R. 1291 and to offer suggestions for the further development of a 21st Century GI Bill. We are especially thankful for the leadership that the Subcommittee and the full Committee are providing on this important issue, for it is vital to the defense and well being of our Nation.

We wholeheartedly support the provisions of H.R. 1291 since they bring the current GI Bill for active duty personnel closer to being a truly effective program that fulfills the Nation's promise to those who help to keep our country free. As the Committee knows, Chapter 30 of the Montgomery GI Bill has not kept pace with the cost of education in America. Over the past sixteen years since its inception, the program has eroded to the point where almost half of those who participate in it are unable to use it as the primary means of supporting the pursuit of their educational goals. To complicate matters, the support that is received generally counts against them when they seek other financial assistance such as that provided by the Department of Education through its Title IV, student aid program. We believe that the GI Bill should be the premier program that our Nation offers, bar none. H.R. 1291 is a giant step in that direction.

We would like to offer a couple of suggestions that we believe would strengthen the current and future effectiveness of this legislation.

1. The Montgomery GI Bill is currently indexed to the Consumer Price Index (CPI). It is our understanding that this index would, under the provisions of H.R. 1291, be nullified during fiscal years 2002, 2003 and 2004 and then returns in FY 2005. We strongly believe that the GI Bill should be tied to the cost of education and suggest that there are legitimate cost of education measures in existence (versus CPI) that could be used for the future increases, beginning in 2005. This would be an interim action as the Nation moves closer to providing the kind of GI Bill that was recommended by the Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance.
2. In today's society the concept of lifelong learning has risen to a new level of importance. Very few occupations or professions remain static; there is the constant requirement for workers to upgrade their knowledge and skills in order to remain competitive. Many times the costs that accompany concentrated, short term, advanced instruction are much greater on a monthly basis than those affiliated with a two or four year degree program. One way to offset this increased cost is to provide the veteran with an opportunity to utilize his or her benefits at an accelerated rate. For example, a veteran could have the option of receiving two months of benefits, with entitlement charged accordingly, for one month of enrollment in an approved short-term education or training program. Another option could be to pay 60 percent of the cost of the program or course as is currently done with flight training.

Mr. Chairman, we applaud the Subcommittee and full Committee's action on H.R. 1291 and stand ready to assist you in obtaining the passage of this important legislation. Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the bill and to offer related recommendations.